DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 365 289 IR 016 461

AUTHOR Abramson, Jeffrey B.
TITLE Democratic Designs for Electronic Town Meetings.
INSTITUTION Aspen Inst., Queenstown, MD.
SPONS AGENCY John and Mary R. Markle Foundation, New York, N.Y.
REPORT NO ISBN-0-89843-140-9
PUB DATE Oct 93
NOTE 39p.; Paper prepared for a Conference on Electronic Town Meetings (Queenstown, MD, October 26-28, 1992). A product of Communications and Society Program.
AVAILABLE FROM Aspen Institute, Communications and Society Program, 1755 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W., Suite 501, Washington, DC 20036.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Agenda Setting; Audience Response; Democracy; Elections; Interactive Video; *Mass Media Effects; Mass Media Role; Media Research; *Political Campaigns; Political Candidates; Presidential Campaigns (United States); *Public Opinion; Sampling; *Technological Advancement; *Telecommunications; *Television
IDENTIFIERS Electronic Town Meetings

ABSTRACT

The 1992 presidential campaign put the idea of the electronic town meeting firmly on the political scene, and each of the presidential debates during that campaign experimented with the town meeting format. This paper reviews the tradition of town meeting democracy in the United States and proposes ways to carry that tradition on with the help of modern electronic media. The designs and safeguards proposed were derived through consultation with a group of political leaders, scholars, and industry representatives who convened to discuss a draft paper on the subject prepared by the same author. Problems that have been recognized with regard to the electronic town meeting are those of oversimplification, empowerment, push button democracy (home polling schemes), issues of equality and manipulation, and how to select a representative sample. Practical issues that must be addressed include the following: (1) venue; (2) issue for discussion; (3) agenda setting/editorial control; (4) audience and participant selection and composition; (5) choice of interactive technology; and (6) eliminating multiple voting from the home. Scenarios are presented for an electronic town meeting. Seven appendixes include a list of town meetings held, discussions of two of the sample scenarios, and other supplemental information about the meeting process. (SLD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED 365 289

The Aspen Institute

Communications and Society

Democratic Designs for

Electronic Town Meetings

by JEFFREY B. ABRAMSON

CHARLES M. FIRESTONE
Program Director

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

S. Ralston

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

DEMOCRATIC DESIGNS FOR
ELECTRONIC TOWN MEETINGS

Paper prepared for a conference on Electronic Town Meetings
The Aspen Institute Wye Center
Queenstown, Maryland
October 26–28, 1992

by
Jeffrey B. Abramson
Professor of Politics
Brandeis University

Charles M. Firestone
Director
Communications and Society Program
The Aspen Institute
Washington, D.C.

For additional copies of this report, please contact:

The Aspen Institute
Communications and Society Program
1755 Massachusetts Avenue, NW
Suite 501
Washington, DC 20036
Phone: (202) 736-5818
Fax: (202) 986-1913

Charles M. Firestone
Director

Katharina Kopp
Program Coordinator and Production Editor

Copyright © 1993 by
The Aspen Institute

The Aspen Institute
Wye Center, P.O. Box 222
Queenstown, Maryland 21658
Published in the United States of America
in 1993 by The Aspen Institute

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN #0-89843-140-9

Layout and production: W. Daniel Wright

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION by Charles M. Firestone v

ELECTRONIC TOWN MEETINGS:
Proposals for Democracy's Future
by Jeffrey B. Abramson 1

A) **Democratic Goals of the Face-to Face Town Meeting** 2
The Town Meeting as a Forum for Civic Education 2
The Town Meeting as a Way to Empower Ordinary Citizens 3
The Town Meeting as a Way to Promote Access and Equality 4

B) **Democratic Goals and Problems of the Electronic Town Meeting** .. 5

C) **Designing the Electronic Town Meeting: Practical Issues** 8

D) **Three Scenarios for an Electronic Town Meeting** 10
Local Town Meetings: San Antonio 10
National Town Meetings 13
Televised Legislative Debates 14

E) **Conclusion** 15

APPENDIX A: Selected List of Electronic Town Meetings 17

APPENDIX B: Local Town Meeting: San Antonio 19

APPENDIX C: Local Town Meeting: San Francisco 20

APPENDIX D: Lawrence K. Grossman, "Keep Politics Alive" 24

APPENDIX E: Planning Meeting Participants 25

APPENDIX F: Conference Participants 26

APPENDIX G: Communications and Society Program Statement 28

DEMOCRATIC DESIGNS FOR ELECTRONIC TOWN MEETINGS

INTRODUCTION

by Charles M. Firestone, Director
The Aspen Institute
Communications and Society Program

In 1992, under a grant from and in cooperation with The John and Mary R. Markle Foundation, The Aspen Institute Communications and Society Program launched its project entitled, ***Toward Democratic Designs for Electronic Town Meetings.*** After an initial meeting convened by The Markle Foundation on the subject, the Communications and Society Program commissioned Professor Jeffrey Abramson of Brandeis University, and co-author of *The Electronic Commonwealth,* to prepare a draft paper (a) setting forth a context and (b) suggesting desirable elements of one or more designs of electronic town meetings ("ETMs"). Specifically, what elements should be a part of any such "meetings" and what should be avoided? Finally, he was to suggest (c) possible experiments combining the desirable elements of these "ETMs."

The Program then convened a meeting of 25 leaders and experts in affected fields to address the issues posed by Dr. Abramson's draft paper, and by Lloyd Morrisett's essay on electronic citizenship in The Markle Foundation's 1991 Annual Report, at the Aspen Institute's Wye River House, October 26–28, 1992. A list of those participants appears in the back of this document. The purpose of the roundtable conference was to help design the elements of future electronic town meetings so that they will be likely to serve democratic objectives and values. For, the new communications technology can be used to enhance democracy, but can just as easily be abused under the guise of democracy.

The Abramson paper, which was revised after the October 1992 meeting, but is not intended as a direct report of that session, suggests that traditional town meetings historically accomplished three democratic goals —educating, empowering and equalizing citizens. Translated to modern

technologies many issues arise. These include the problems of framing an issue for a mass audience, setting a neutral and fair agenda and format, giving the audience a stake in the outcome without eliminating the representative system of democracy established in the Constitution, assuring equitable electronic access to the meeting and a certain level of representativeness of the sampled participants, and providing for a proper use of interactive technology.

This leads to a series of practical issues that were raised in Dr. Abramson's paper and addressed at the roundtable meeting. These are:

1. *Venue and scope:* national, state, or local settings and topics, each provides advantages and disadvantages.

2. *Issue:* devoting a meeting to a single issue will allow for depth, but the issue should be susceptible to an open exchange of ideas.

3. *Agenda setting/editorial control:* to avoid manipulation, control should be exercised by an independent entity. But how is that independence defined and measured? Furthermore, efforts should be made to involve all stakeholders in setting the agenda.

4. *Audience/participants:* to guard against self-selection, it is recommended that organizers employ both scientific sampling and unscientific responses by citizens; and access should be provided to everyone at low cost.

5. *Choice of interactive technology:* there is a need for sufficient technical capacity for the process, going beyond yes/no responses, extending beyond a single medium, and continuing beyond the time of the particular meeting.

6. *Multiple voting from the home:* security is needed against fraud by multiple voting, and to protect privacy and the secret ballot.

Dr. Abramson concludes with some suggestions for experiments in electronic town meetings at the local, state, and federal levels. Much of the motivation for these suggestions comes from the desire of The Markle Foundation to experiment in developing a truly democratic genre of interactive, citizen participatory town meetings. Nevertheless, it is clear that Dr. Abramson, the Markle Foundation, The Aspen Institute Communications and Society Program, and virtually everyone else with whom I have been in contact on the subject understand that there will likely and rightly be many different species of electronic town meetings.

Impact of the Conference. A variety of other ideas and activities resulted as well from the October roundtable conference. One participant, Larry Grossman, published an Op Ed article in the *New York Times* (see Appendix D) suggesting that an independent commission, particularly, the Presidential Debates Commission, organize a series of debates between the Administration and the loyal opposition on particular substantive public policy issues. These debates would be the centerpiece for electronic town meetings and other educational and interactive activities at the State and local levels addressing the specific topic of the debate.

Second, as reported above, the meeting resulted in recommendations for a series of experiments in electronic town meeting designs that The Markle Foundation is considering funding.

Third, the meeting led to an arrangement between The Markle Foundation and a software simulation company for the creation of a simulation software game, SimHealth™, that is intended to address, and thereby teach, public policy questions and processes (in this case, healthcare policy) through simulation technology. The game will also employ the value quadrant that James O'Toole uses in another genre of Aspen Institute seminars.

ETM Report Card. Fourth, we hope that this publication will be useful to practitioners of all kinds in thinking through the important, value-laden issues associated with electronic town meetings. In that regard, we propose that an appropriate expert and neutral organization monitor electronic town meetings against, at the least, the following criteria:

1. **Preparation:** Was the audience prepared for the subject matter at issue and the interactive elements of the meeting by such means as educational workshops, materials, other meetings, and other forms of networking?

2. **Equity:** Is the meeting fairly accessible to all citizens and constituents, however that may be defined?

3. **Fairness:** Is the sponsoring organization independent of outside influence? Is the format fair to all sides? Is the audience response being manipulated?

4. **Participation:** Does the meeting allow for true participation or is it limited to a yes/no response or worse?

5. **Deliberation:** To what extent does the process allow for the deliberative elements of democratic debate, instead of instant pushbutton judgments?

Some broader points. Beyond these practical results and suggestions, it is important to keep in mind a few salient points about "electronic town meetings." Fortunately, discussions on designing electronic town meetings often lead to broader discussions of societal values and contexts.

First, these events should be viewed as means to achieve something significant, be it, for example, to inform the audience or to include the electorate more directly in the political decision making process. It should not be a mere exercise in using technology. It is important to consider electronic town meetings as part of a broader process of *electronic citizenship*, or citizenship generally—electronic or not. Those who plan, participate in, or think seriously about electronic town meetings tend to conclude that these events are most effective, most important, and most consistent with democratic values and ideals if they are part of a process of citizenship that has elements of *education*, *iteration*, *deliberation*, and *real choice*. They do not serve the public well if they defeat the above elements of citizenship by manipulating the format, co-opting the process, or unthinkingly applying the technology.

Second, it is rather clear that the public will come more and more to expect a *participatory role in governance*—one that will have electronic elements. Whether by telephone, fax, computer, cable, radio, over-the-air television, unknown technologies of the future, or various combinations of these, the public will expect either to be governing itself through more evident means, or *appear* to be governing itself. The technology of virtual reality allows one to put on computerized goggles and navigate a computer-constructed "virtual world." It is extremely important to democracies around the world that electronic town meetings be true to democratic principles—educational, empowering, and equalizing. The public will have to be vigilant, meanwhile, to resist the temptations of a "virtual democracy," with all the appearances of democracy, but with goggles over its eyes preventing it from seeing what is really happening to its democratic institutions.

Third, at the same time, *traditional democratic institutions*—political parties, politicians, interest groups, and various levels of campaign and governmental structures, and the traditional media will all have to adjust to the changes in the public's perceptions, its expectations, and its capabilities for governing itself more directly, or else they will face extinction. The traditional role of the intermediary or filter of these traditional institutions needs to be reevaluated and reformulated for this emerging new technological and political environment.

Acknowledgments. I want to take this opportunity to thank The John and Mary R. Markle Foundation for its grant to the Communications and Society Program which made this seminar possible, and for its active

interest and sharing of its expertise in the subject matter, the Forum participants for their valuable time and energetic participation in this activity, and Katharina Kopp, for her planning and coordinating the seminar and her editing assistance.

Charles M. Firestone
Director
The Aspen Institute
Communications and Society Program
Washington, D.C.

ELECTRONIC TOWN MEETINGS: PROPOSALS FOR DEMOCRACY'S FUTURE

by Jeffrey B. Abramson
Professor of Politics
Brandeis University

The 1992 presidential campaign put the idea of "electronic town meetings" squarely on the political map. Finding ways to let citizens converse directly with the candidates became the key imperative of the political season. Talk radio and television shows emerged as favorite haunts for candidates eager to bypass reporters and field questions from the studio audience or telephone callers. Even one of the presidential debates experimented with this "town meeting" format, producing results that captured the public's fancy and made many feel that politics again resembled conversation among real people. Computer networks and electronic bulletin boards sponsored even more novel versions of town meetings, where people corresponded without sharing a common meeting-place or even meeting-time. These innovations appealed to millions of Americans frustrated with traditional politics and traditional press coverage. The new electronic media promised to cure the disaffected, by restoring to the people the power to interact directly with the candidates.

The campaign is over but the debate over electronic town meetings is just beginning. This is because the same technologies that enhanced citizen access to the candidates during the election can also involve citizens more directly in the process of governance between elections. On the horizon is a vast rejuvenation of our democracy, as a new dialogue flows between citizens and leaders. But dangers of misuse and manipulation of the new technologies also loom, especially if citizens are deprived of the civic education necessary for informed participation and reasoned judgment.

This paper reviews the tradition of town meeting democracy in the United States and proposes ways to carry that tradition responsibly forward with the help of modern electronic media. The designs and safeguards proposed below were arrived at through consultation with a group of political leaders, scholars and industry representatives convened during the summer and fall of 1992 by the John and Mary R. Markle Foundation and The Aspen Institute's Communications and Society Program.

A) DEMOCRATIC GOALS OF THE FACE-TO FACE TOWN MEETING

The town meeting has been "an inspirational symbol of American democracy since before the Revolution." In its traditional, face-to-face format, the town meeting aspired to accomplish three great democratic goals: (1) to educate citizens about their common interests; (2) to empower citizens to govern themselves; and (3) to equalize citizens in a process open and accessible to all. Of course, real town meetings fell short of these educating, empowering, and equalizing ideals. The earliest meetings restricted participation on the basis of race, gender, church membership, and property. Even after lifting these restrictions, New England town meetings rarely attracted more than 60 percent of residents. Moreover, far from being a model of reasoned debate, "every private grudge, every suggestion of petulance and ignorance . . . [was] faithfully produced," noted Ralph Waldo Emerson about his own town meeting in 1833.

For all its shortcomings, the town meeting still made democracy a participatory rather than a spectator enterprise. Participation in public debate forged the "bonds of empathy" that motivated people to seek consensus, agreement and common ground.

A brief review of the successes and failures of the traditional town meeting will provide background for designing an "electronic" town meeting.

The Town Meeting as a Forum for Civic Education

Visiting the United States in the 1830s, the great French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville marveled at the hands-on education in democracy that town meetings gave Americans. He described how participation in public debate rubbed off "the rust of selfishness" and taught townsfolk to think of themselves as citizens jointly responsible for the common good. And he concluded that town meetings "are to liberty what primary schools are to science; they bring it within the people's reach, they teach men how to use and how to enjoy it."

Why was the face-to-face assembly an ideal forum for the education of citizens? Partly, the civic education took place through the prompting and preparation for the meeting—the mailing of the town report to all residents; the public "warning" of the agenda. But the crucial education, according to Tocqueville, occurred at the meeting itself. To attend was to participate in a potentially transforming process of open debate that was different in kind from the more isolated way individuals participate in voting and elections. Town meeting members might eventually vote; they might agree to disagree and settle their differences only by outvoting one another. But first the members *deliberated*; they stood up, in the presence of their neighbors, and exchanged claims about the town's best interests. Such a process of public debate weakened arguments made in terms of naked self interest. Persuasive arguments identified a common good capable of resonating across factional lines. In short, the deliberation empowered citizens who respected the

different views of their neighbors and who sought to resolve those differences through consensus rather than conflict.

Ideally, three conditions need to be met for deliberation to do its work of getting people to listen and learn from one another. The face-to-face town meeting houses all three conditions:

> *First, political messages of substance can be exchanged at length. Citizens are not reduced to receiving ever-shrinking sound bites. Second, there are opportunities for citizens to reflect on those messages. They do not have to respond instantaneously. . . . Third, the messages can be processed interactively. Citizens can exchange reactions, . . . and test their opinions against those expressed by others.*

But empirical studies of town meetings show that face-to-face assembly does not always work to teach deliberative habits or reasoned debate. Some participants experience a "burst of solidarity" and testify to the "listening, learning and changing [of] opinions" that goes on when people —who disagree but have to live as neighbors—reason together until a prevailing sentiment becomes apparent. But not every one in a town finds it easy to talk in public. Many have a fear of expressing disagreements in public, making enemies, or being made to look foolish. Intimidation sets in, keeping significant numbers from attending or from talking if they do attend. Not surprisingly, talk at a town meeting recapitulates status inequalities in the community.

Moreover, the ideal of deliberation toward common ground is hard to practice once the era of small, homogeneous towns gives way to the large, more diverse populations of today. Even small cities are too big to be governed by face-to-face meetings. And one well-known study of a surviving small Vermont town meeting traces the breaking apart of the deliberative ideal once developers catering to tourism bought property in a farming community; the farmers and developers had such opposed interests about zoning ordinances that debate collapsed into angry shouting matches. In the presence of such actual conflicts of interest, face-to-face deliberation should not be idealized as a cure-all for conflict.

The Town Meeting as a Way to Empower Ordinary Citizens

The second democratic virtue of the town meeting was that it placed the power of government in the hands of ordinary citizens. Throughout American history, the town meeting has been the premier, and often the only, example of "direct democracy." "It is a consequence of this institution," Emerson noted in praise,

> *that not a school house, a public pew, a bridge, a pound, a mill-dam, hath been set up, or pulled down, or altered, or bought, or sold, without the whole population of this town having a voice in the affair.*

For Emerson, "having a voice in the affair" was the key to "the general contentment" that town meeting democracy delivers. The

> *people truly feel that they are lords of the soil. In every winding road, in every stone fence, in the smokes of the poor-house chimney, . . . they read their own power.*

But real town meetings do not make "lords" of citizens quite as easily as Emerson's rhapsodic prose implies. By the twentieth century, the surviving "Massachusetts and Connecticut town meetings . . . were run by an obvious professional and business elite" sitting as an advisory committee drafting recommendations. Individuals (with little information beyond the recommendations of the committee) found it hard to dispute its recommendations. The actual meeting seemed to settle regularly into a rubber-stamping mode. The issue of whether the town meeting can be redesigned to empower ordinary citizens, as it was intended to do, is of vital concern for the future.

The Town Meeting as a Way to Promote Access and Equality

In theory, the traditional town meeting opened the doors of government to all equally; it made town hall a genuine marketplace of ideas, accessible to the full number and range of different points of view in the community. "In this open democracy," Emerson wrote, "every opinion had an utterance, . . . every individual his fair weight in the government." The "rich give counsel, but the poor also." But here again real town meetings lived up to Emerson's ideal of equality only imperfectly. The town meeting was an egalitarian institution in the sense that it established an "open door" policy for participation in government (at least once the racial, religious, gender, and property restrictions we noted earlier were abolished). But even in the twentieth century, the volunteer or self-selected audience that walked through the open door was rarely a representative cross section of the community. Leaving participation voluntary worked to the advantage of organized interests in the town and against marginal and minority groups. The process even favored those who lived close to town hall or who enjoyed the leisure it takes to attend political meetings in person.

In sum, the town meeting housed a powerful theory of democracy: a vision where ordinary citizens equally flock to the assembly, eager to persuade or be persuaded in turn about the common good. But no actual town meeting practices these ideals perfectly. Rates of participation have been low; a voluntary system of attendance worked to the disadvantage of the least powerful; and the ability of people to work through actual conflicts of interest has been checkered at best.

B) DEMOCRATIC GOALS AND PROBLEMS OF THE ELECTRONIC TOWN MEETING

Over the last twenty years, a number of experiments have tried to translate the face-to-face town meeting into the televised or "electronic town meeting" (see Appendix A). Given the obstacles of time and distance that keep many from attending meetings in person, the purpose of televising the meeting is to invite more people into the process in a more equal fashion. The parent who does not have a baby sitter, the worker without transportation to town hall, the elderly or frail, the person fearful of speaking in public: all these people might arguably "attend" meetings via television that they would not attend in person. Moreover, the sheer act of televising a model deliberation of ordinary citizens in debate about the common good could have important educational benefits, outstripping the quality of so-called "town meetings" on the talk shows. In all these senses, electronic communications should be welcomed as an ally in the search for ways to overcome citizen apathy and to restore substance to political dialogue.

To date, the most common format for electronic town meetings has been a marriage of television and telephone. The usual format provides a toll-free "800" number to viewers, so that they can call in responses to the meeting. A variant of this format is two-way or interactive cable television, where viewers send responses back through a computer console attached to the television set itself. In either format, the speed of modern computers permits the views of thousands of callers to be reported to the "town meeting" in a matter of minutes.

Can the town meeting be successfully translated onto the television? This depends on whether we can design electronic meetings in ways that preserve genuine deliberation and exchange of views. The great danger is that we will end up with a frivolous "electronic plebiscite" which dispenses with sustained debate entirely and invites isolated and anonymous television viewers to set government policy simply by pushing buttons at home, without ever "meeting" at all.

More specifically, a review of previous experiments with electronic democracy indicates a number of problem areas:

1. *Education vs. Oversimplification.* Few past experiments have prepared citizens adequately for informed debate at a town meeting. Television is notorious for replacing sustained discussion with passing chat. The first order of business is to televise a town meeting on complex issues (such as the deficit, health care reform, race relations, crime, or school choice) in ways that will break free of the logic of entertainment programming, delve deeply into matters and yet hold a satisfactory audience. Moreover, electronic town meetings are meaningless if they occur in a vacuum; they must form the apex of an information pyramid built up by newspapers, electronic mail, on-line data bases, prior television programs and any other medium available.

2. *Empowerment.* Some proponents of electronic town meetings attack representative democracy as obsolete in an age where computers can tally the votes of all instantly. They propose a new direct democracy where the people legislate through televised plebiscites or referenda. But it bears repeating that the direct democracy of plebiscites is quite different than the direct democracy of town meetings. In fact, a plebiscite "provides no opportunity for human contact or mutual persuasion." This is why powerful leaders from Napoleon to Mussolini to Peron pioneered government by plebiscite. The holding of a yes or no vote enabled them to give the appearance of power to scattered individuals, even while controlling who spoke to the people and what ideas were heard.

For these reasons, the electronic town meeting we seek to design would *not* empower people to set official government policy through home voting. But then what kind of power would electronic town meetings have? What is at stake? Surely, Emerson was right to emphasize that attendance mattered at face-to-face town meetings precisely because the meeting had the actual power of local government. If "electronic town meetings" are ever to be worthy of the name, then people must understand their participation matters to government, that their views will influence their representatives. In designing experiments in 1993, we face a situation where the "electronic town meeting" can be advisory in nature only. But we should make every effort to interest office holders and news media in the advice forthcoming. We should do our utmost to stress the importance of holding a "demonstration deliberation," of modeling for the public an example of ordinary citizens struggling, often clumsily, to climb the ladder from having an opinion to defending a considered judgment. Even as a teaching example, such a demonstration could force issues onto the public agenda and frame arguments to be pursued by our representatives. Moreover, it is likely that clear choices emerging from a widely televised town meeting would, by their very nature, exert compelling effect on legislators.

3. *Push Button Democracy.* As mentioned above, a related problem is the tendency of electronic town meetings to have very little of the "meeting" about them. Instead, the technology continues to fascinate many with bypassing conversation altogether and satisfying citizens with instant "feedback" or home polling schemes. But town meetings should not be used as a pretext for permitting television viewers to push buttons silently and call that "participation." Feedback of the sort we typically give in polls is no substitute for deliberation. One is passive, the other active. One is instant, the other reflective.

4. *Equality.* Television has the potential to open the door to the town meeting wider than it has ever been opened before. But cable television systems (those most likely to be interested in our project) rarely reach more than 60–65 percent of homes in a local market; the cost also means generally

lower rates of penetration in poor and minority neighborhoods. Thus, a new set of equality concerns has to be dealt with in the television format.

5. *Manipulation.* On January 4, 1986, Seattle's King TV and the Documentary Guild produced and televised a one-hour satellite-convened "international town meeting" or "citizen's summit" between residents of Seattle and Leningrad. Phil Donahue in Seattle and Vladimir Posner of the Soviet State Committee for Television and Radio were the moderators. The meeting was billed as between "just plain folks." But the performance of the Leningrad group betrayed a governmental script. In a discussion of racial discrimination, Seattle residents admitted to its U.S. presence but Leningraders thought their nation free of it. Dissident Andrei Sakharov was in prison "because he was a traitor;" the Soviets shot down a Korean Air passenger plane because it was really a spy plane, and so on. Here was a perfect modern example of town meeting government as puppet government. Town meetings in the United States are unlikely to have their strings pulled in this way. Still, manipulation comes in many forms. On January 28, 1992, CBS broadcast a "national town meeting" called "America on Line." The program ended with gripping images of homelessness. Even as these images lingered, viewers were asked to call in votes on President Bush's handling of the economy. Not surprisingly, the referendum produced a far more negative vote on the economy than did a simultaneously and scientifically conducted poll (53 percent of call-in respondents said they were "worse off" than a year ago, while only 32 percent of the representative sample said the same).

In 1992, many thoughtful observers pointed out the authoritarian pitfalls in the design of electronic town halls that leave government in control of the televised presentation of issues and alternatives to the people. These critics included Walter Goodman, Anna Quinlen, and Anthony Lewis in the *New York Times*, and Elizabeth Drew in the *New Yorker*. Indeed, the use of the word "fascism" to describe visions of a President avoiding Congress and taking his case directly to ill-prepared and easily conned citizens "assembled" in electronic town meetings became so widespread that we must be aware of the negative connotations that the phrase "electronic town meetings" may now carry.

6. *Representative Sample Problem.* As mentioned above, the CBS "America on Line" program was roundly criticized for presenting results from a self-selected, unscientifically chosen "call-in" audience. Another recent example of skewed electronic town meetings occurred on September 16, 1992 during Ted Koppel's late-night *Viewpoint* show. In the program, a studio audience questioned a panel of journalists on the subject of media bias. Apparently, there was no attempt on the part of the producers to assure that the questioners would comprise a representative cross-section of the community. Instead, the identity of questioners showed that various groups, ranging from Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam to the conservative

Concerned Women of America had arranged to send spokespersons to "represent" their group at the meeting. The resulting pattern of questions was noticeably idiosyncratic.

When it comes to actual elections, no one questions the legitimacy of the results simply because those who bother to vote do not form a representative sample of the population. But the difference is that everyone who wants to vote can vote. In the case of televised town meetings, not everyone has access to push button telephones or cable television (to take just two examples). This obligates electronic town meeting designers to make certain that those who participate are representative of the population at large.

C) DESIGNING THE ELECTRONIC TOWN MEETING: PRACTICAL ISSUES

How can we design electronic town meetings in ways that will invite more people into the political process, and yet not flirt with the dangers discussed in the previous sections? The overall key is to highlight the need for more deliberation, not more instant polls. Following are more specific design issues:

1. *Venue.* The technology gives us a choice face-to-face town meetings never had: we can hold regional or national town meetings as well as local ones. The final section of this paper recommends experimenting with a variety of venues. The advantage of a national town meeting is that all sections of the country could see it as a relevant model. The national meeting would also attract the most attention. The advantage of a local meeting is that it is more likely to recreate the intimacy and influence of a real town meeting.

2. *Issue.* Each town meeting should be devoted to a single issue, in order to assure discussion in depth. The chosen issue should be one that can prompt an open exchange of ideas. Thus, it would be wise to stay clear of the so-called "family value" or "social" issues (such as abortion or school prayer), where views are often fixed. By contrast, there is fluidity in people's views about the deficit, national health care, or school reform. (The deficit is an excellent example where the common interest in reduction is stymied by the efforts of different groups to block reforms that would hurt their special programs. It thus provides the kind of issue where a citizen's town meeting might achieve a consensus that interest-group driven discussions will not. Query whether the new citizen's movement on the deficit, led by retiring Senator Warren Rudman and former Senator Paul Tsongas, would be interested in holding an electronic town meeting?)

3. *Agenda Setting/Editorial Control.* Who should choose the issue and have "editorial control" over how it is presented at the meeting? A telephone

survey of recent electronic town meetings reveals two different models. The predominant model is for the television station airing the meeting to insist on producing the program itself, selecting the moderators, experts, etc. The alternative is for some non-profit citizen group to originate the proposal and to negotiate for time on a local station, while insisting on retaining some degree of control over program content. The League of Women Voters would be an obvious candidate for this agenda setting role. While television stations are likely to insist on final authority over program content, we urge that electronic town meetings be designed to give independent citizen's groups a role in developing the issues. (Appendix C describes the efforts of a citizen's group in San Francisco to maintain just this kind of control over an electronic town meeting televised in the Bay Area in 1987.)

4. *Audience/Participants.* To deal with the unrepresentative results that self-selected audiences are likely to produce, we recommend a dual audience solution (a solution used by WGBH in its national PBS production on health care reform, "Condition Critical," aired on April 7, 1992). The studio audience should be pre-selected according to prevailing scientific, sampling techniques. Their deliberations will comprise a democratic cross-section of community views. But in order to involve home viewers, "unscientific" participation should be invited from any and all via 800 telephone call-in lines, two-way cable hook-ups, videoconferencing or other interactive technologies. In this way, the town meeting will remain "open" to all who wish to participate, while the studio audience will serve as a control group against which to measure the views expressed over the interactive facilities. It is imperative that the program distinguish the views of the representative audience from the views of self-selected participants.

The 1987 San Francisco electronic town meeting (see Appendix C) employed a similar but "flipped" solution. A pre-selected random sample of the city population used confidential telephone numbers to call-in their responses during a televised issues debate; the studio audience was not scientifically screened, though it was selected with some concern for diversity. The moderator's function was to confront the ongoing television discussion with the "representative views" of the community being telephoned in.

Either solution will deal satisfactorily with the representative sample problem.

5. *Choice of interactive technology.* Long distance telephone companies provide "800" or "900" networks that are capable of handling up to 10,000 calls in 90 seconds. MCI has provided telephone connections for Perot's call-in vote on whether he should reenter the 1992 campaign. Call Interactive" (a joint venture of AT&T and American Express Information Services) has been used in conjunction with CBS' "America On Line" special, an ABC radio program on cancer, a U.S.O. fundraiser and "Wheel of Fortune."

Care should be taken to provide sufficient 800 capacity so that the experiment does not end up frustrating citizens who wish to participate with endless busy signals (as happened during the "America On Line" program, when only 314,786 calls got through out of 24.6 million attempts). Further controls must be designed to compensate for the fact that certain regions of the country have relatively less access to long distance lines than other regions.

In addition to telephone call-in formats, town meetings could be held in many cities using two-way communication over cable television. Examples of interactive cable systems that permit viewers to send as well as receive messages include: KBLCOM systems in San Antonio, Minneapolis, Portland, and Upper Manhattan; Berks Community Television in Reading, Pa.; a TX or a "Big Sky" network in the West; Orlando; Sacramento or Fairfax, Virginia. Part d) below recommends an experiment in San Antonio over two-way cable. But any experiment with cable as the vehicle for a televised town meeting has to worry about access problems for the nonsubscriber.

7. *Multiple voting from the home.* Technical solutions must be provided to prevent individuals from "voting" at the town meeting repeatedly via telephone or two-way cable. On the other hand, technical solutions must also be found to permit more than one person at each household to participate electronically in the meeting.

D) THREE SCENARIOS FOR AN ELECTRONIC TOWN MEETING

This section lays out three scenarios for holding experimental electronic town meetings in 1993 and beyond. The first scenario maps out a *local* town meeting; we use San Antonio as one city (among many others) which has both the technology for and interest in a town meeting. The second scenario is a sketch of a *national* town meeting. The President would begin such a meeting by presenting his Administration's plans on an issue such as health care. The opposition political party would respond and the public would be invited to participate through interactive technologies. The third scenario taps into already existing television coverage of Congress and state legislatures. Televised legislative debates could become the starting point for concentrating public attention on a particular issue. Using interactive technologies to invite a wide array of citizens into the debate could go a long way to restoring interest in politics and fostering a new, more substantive dialogue between constituent and representative.

Local Town Meetings: San Antonio

San Antonio is a city of 935,739 (1990 Census) in Bexar County (population of 1,185,394 or 409,043 households). San Antonio Paragon Cable, a subsidiary of KBLCOM of Houston, is subscribed to by approximately 258,000 households in the county, for a market penetration of 63.1 percent as

of November, 1991. City and county both have sizeable Hispanic and Anglo communities (San Antonio has 520,192 persons of Hispanic origin, 339,015 Anglos or whites of non-Hispanic origin). Apparently penetration among Hispanic households lags behind and is estimated at about 30.2 percent (Appendix B). Paragon's own research indicates the penetration may be much greater among Hispanics living in integrated areas of the city. But it is probably the case that some financial subsidy would have to be arranged to make certain participation in a local town meeting via cable is not skewed along lines of ethnic background.

KBL-TV is the advertising sales arm of the Paragon cable system. It also does its own programming on Channel 26 of the system. KBL-TV is licensed by Zenith Corporation to use a state of the art interactive technology called "Z-View." 80,000 households have Z-View in the county. Currently, its major use is to permit subscribers to "interact with the KBL-TV advertiser by responding electronically to an offer." A research report available from the Markle Foundation describes the technology of "Z-View" in detail. In essence, subscriber responses are conveyed immediately to the cable system's central computer by an upstream radio signal sent from a special home transmitter or converter. These home transmitters are currently available on about 25 cable systems nationwide and they can handle approximately 180 return messages per second. This kind of speed means that even if 30,000 cable subscribers used their transmitters simultaneously to order a particular pay-per-view movie, the head-end computer could handle all the responses within a few minutes.

What about moving from interactive ads to interactive politics? Mayor Nelson Wolff of San Antonio has dabbled on occasion with an interactive segment during his weekly "Mayor's Forum" talk show. The program begins by posing a question to viewers on a vital city issue; literally hundreds of alternative responses can be posted on the screen for viewers to choose among. (Viewers select a number on their Z-View remote, corresponding to their choice, and then push the "Star" button. For this reason, KBL-TV refers to its interactive system as "Star Response.") Star Response can poll, calculate and display the responses of the cable audience so quickly that these responses become available while the Mayor's program is still on the air, thus permitting the views of the audience to be taken into consideration, debated, and mulled over. In other words, the great advantage is that the content of the program itself can change in response to viewer responses. This is all to the good and makes it worthwhile pursuing an experiment with political programming with Star Response. But, in terms of the values discussed in Part A above, the "push button" interactivity of Star Response will have to be supplemented by some call-in format so that home viewers can debate as well as vote.

In 1993, a San Antonio pilot project might work as follows:

1. *Issue.* The chosen topic should be one that can excite and animate the local audience. The issue could be of national import (e.g., health care, race relations, the deficit, schools), or it could be particular to San Antonio.

(Preliminary research shows that San Antonio is in the midst of heated debate about water scarcity. But while this issue would resonate with Western and Southwestern audiences, it might not play nationally.)

If we go forward with an experiment in San Antonio, we should invite KBL-TV to suggest the issue that it could, practically speaking, make the subject of an interactive television program. But we should use our influence to bring KBL-TV producers together with various groups in the community, so that there is from the beginning, democratic, community input into the agenda. Involving the League of Women Voters (or equivalent group) would add great legitimacy. In addition, the San Antonio Mayor's office has a "Project 90's" group already in place to discuss city priorities for the rest of the century.

2. *Civic Education Prior to the Town Meeting.* San Antonio has two daily papers—the *Express-News* (a Hearst paper) and the *Light.* Metropolitan editors at both these papers should be contacted and their cooperation enlisted in printing stories both about the upcoming "town meeting" and about background information on the issues. KBL-TV should televise at least one, and preferably more, shows devoted to educating voters on the issues. The League of Women Voters or other civic groups willing to be a "sponsor" of the meeting should be in charge of preparing a "guide to the issues" information pamphlet for all participants in the town meeting. (At best, this would be made available to any resident of San Antonio who requested it. The pamphlet should also be put "on line" with any service available.)

Every possible medium for informing residents about the issues to be debated at the town meeting should be used. This includes curriculum-based programs in the schools and universities, and imaginative uses of networked computers and electronic bulletin boards to prompt discussion and sharing of views. Experiences with computer conferencing (such as the nationwide SeniorNet organization) shows that such conferencing can reduce isolation and function as the electronic equivalent of the old local barber shop, where people could learn the news of the community.

3. *Participation at the Town Meeting.* As discussed in Part C of this paper, the democratic credentials of the town meeting will be best if on-site participation for the meeting is limited to a scientifically chosen cross-section of Bexar County. This will control for any "stacking" attempts. Agreement should then be reached with an "800" telephone provider to handle a set volume of calls. In our judgment, this call-in phase of the town meeting need not be limited to a scientific sample. The program should make clear that the purpose of the call-in is not to conduct a poll at all but rather to invite as many people as possible into the conversation. However, if it is desired to limit telephone participation to a random sample, then a survey research firm should be employed to provide such a sample several weeks before the town meeting. These persons would then be given confidential telephone numbers to call in their responses.

In addition to telephone call-ins, the San Antonio experiment would hinge on using its Star Response system to keep track of viewer responses and debate those responses during the program. Here, the Star Response segment might achieve its greatest legitimacy if it was made available only to a pre-selected scientific sample. This sample should receive the Star Response technology free of charge—an arrangement which would also help resolve any equal access problems between the Hispanic and Anglo communities.

National Town Meetings

The great innovation of the 1992 campaign was use of radio and television talk shows to permit citizens to ask their own questions of the candidates. Former president of PBS and NBC News Lawrence Grossman has outlined ways the same format could now be used between elections to involve the people-at-large more intimately in the process of government (see Appendix D).

The political parties could take the lead in devising national town meetings by establishing a bipartisan Commission on Public Debates, modeled after the Commission on Presidential Debates. This commission would be charged with hammering out a format for the televised debates and scheduling a small number of them each year, one issue to a meeting. For instance, consider how a national town meeting on health care might work. The Administration, through the President and/or top Cabinet officials, would lead-off the meeting by advocating its own health-care reform package. Republican leaders would then respond with their alternative programs. Journalists and an audience of lay citizens would ask questions of both sides. An "800" telephone call-in segment could enliven the meeting for home viewers, by permitting them to ask questions directly.

If such a national town meeting worked well, it would jump-start further debates on health care in other places. Congress would schedule its own debates, carried live over cable or public television. C-SPAN or CNN could widen the conversation considerably by using telephone call-ins and other state-of-the-art interactive technologies to invite viewer participation in the debate.

Another sign that the national town meeting was serving its purpose would be a continuation of the debate at the state and local levels. State and municipal legislative bodies could make use of interactive radio and television shows to pursue the debate with local concerns highlighted. The League of Women Voters and similar civic organizations should be encouraged to distribute "issue guides" modeled after their election guides. In good American fashion, health-care organizations and other advocacy groups could also be counted upon to distribute information.

In sum, high-profile nationally televised town meetings could prime the political pump in the United States; interactive technologies could keep the pump going by empowering citizens in great numbers to speak and be heard.

Televised Legislative Debates

A final scenario would use interactive technologies to turn existing television coverage of Congress and state legislatures into something more like town meetings. C-SPAN could be approached to work on such a project with Congress. (Query as to whether a late-night network program might be interested in delayed presentation of a Senate debate, combined with live interactive dimension?) The California Channel could be approached to experiment with interactive television of legislative debates in that state.

1. *Congress.* One promising starting point is the effort of Norman Ornstein (of the American Enterprise Institute) to convince House leaders to convert the end of the day, underused "special orders" period (where individual members give speeches to an empty chamber) into a time reserved for issues debate. These debates would not be tied to particular bills but would raise more general concerns. In the Senate, Ornstein is engaged in a parallel effort to schedule a debate one evening a week during primetime. In both chambers, the debates would be televised, providing the media carrot for filling up the room and for ratcheting up the levels of preparation. This would achieve immediate benefits for the deliberative quality of Congress. Ornstein envisions positive spillover effects, as the Congressional debates come to have an agenda setting effect on issues covered by commercial and public television stations.

To widen the net and involve ordinary citizens, the Markle Foundation should urge imaginative uses of interactive media. House or Senate participants in the debate would no doubt accept invitations to continue the debate on television with a representative sample of citizens in their region of the nation; C-SPAN, CNN or some other interested broadcaster could string together a series of these regional televised forums. What started as a debate on the legislative floor could be carried into countless living rooms through telephone call-ins, use of two-way cable systems, computer networks, and bulletin boards.

2. *California Legislature.* The California Channel is an independent company distributing television coverage of the California Assembly and Senate by satellite to over 3,000,000 cable subscribers. It is one of the better examples of television doing for a state legislature what C-SPAN does for Congress. The Markle Foundation should solicit proposals as to how the California Channel might add an interactive dimension to its current coverage of the legislature. Tracy Westin and Paul Koplin of the California Channel are both receptive to the notion of using their facilities to support more direct communication on issues between constituent and representative.

E) CONCLUSION

Electronic town meetings seek to accomplish the twin goals of increasing and equalizing civic education and civic participation in government. They can best meet these goals if they are designed to give citizens the information and the time it takes to deliberate and debate issues fully. Democracy will profit little if the marvels of the electronic age are used simply to rush people to express their opinions ever more instantly. But democracy will prosper in an electronic era where new interactive technologies permit citizens to exchange views and reconsider their own preconceptions in light of the views and arguments of others.

The particular suggestions in this paper for how to run an electronic town meeting are hardly solutions to all the problems that inevitably surface when ideals are translated into practice. But we hope the recommendations will provide a useful roadmap for the experiments with electronic town meetings that are already at the cutting edge of democracy's future.

APPENDIX A

SELECTED LIST OF
ELECTRONIC TOWN MEETINGS

1. 1973: **Choices for '76.** Five town meetings broadcast on eighteen New York area television stations on issues of regional development.

2. 1976: **Berks Community Television.** Interactive political meetings on cable television.

3. 1977: **Alaska Legislature** holds live interactive hearings via radio, television and telephone from remote teleconferencing studios.

4. 1977: **National Town Meeting.** President Carter convenes two- hour "radio town hall," takes questions from forty-two persons in twenty-six states.

5. 1977: **QUBE** begins interactive programming in Columbus, Ohio area. Defunct by 1984. Some polling.

6. 1978: **Hawaii TeleVote.** Scientific sample convened to vote unofficially alongside state constitutional convention. Provided information in advance, vote by telephone. Subsequently used in New Zealand and Los Angeles.

7. 1979: **Tristate League of Women Voters** organizes six televised town meetings on planning in the New York-New Jersey-Connecticut area.

8. 1980: **Alaska Televised Town Meeting** on transportation.

9. 1980: **ABC News** conducts much criticized instant "900" telephone call-in poll on who won the first Carter-Reagan debate.

10. 1982: **Los Angeles TeleVote.** Unofficial vote on six regional issues and four initiatives from the official 1982 California state ballot.

11. 1984: **Open/Net.** North Carolina Agency for Public Telecommunications begins weekly televised town halls, focusing on actual legislative debates.

12. 1986: **Citizen's Summit.** Town meeting-style television bridge connecting people in Seattle and Leningrad.

13. 1987: **Choices for the Future.** Sponsors television call-in in San Francisco on viewer responses to controversial ABC miniseries, "Amerika."

14. 1989: **Santa Monica** establishes interactive data base for information about or questions to local government (Public Electronic Network).

15. 1992: **America on Line.** CBS show following State of the Union address featuring "800" telephone poll of viewer responses.

16. 1992: **GEnie.** Candidate Jerry Brown answers questions live on computer service for forty minutes.

17. 1992: **Prodigy.** Questions and answers with Presidential candidates on bulletin board service; on-line information about state races.

18. 1992: **Condition Critical.** PBS program on health care with call-in referendum on health care reform.

19. 1992: **ABC.** National Town Meeting with Ross Perot taking questions with people at remote video facilities.

20. 1992: **Nova Scotia.** Liberal Party elects provincial party leader through "900" telephone poll.

21. 1992: **Perot** holds telephone referendum on whether supporters wish him to re-enter presidential race. "800" number can record only "yes" votes.

22. 1992: **Presidential Debate.** Studio audience asks the questions.

23. 1992: **Larry King Show.** Television town meeting in Wichita, Kansas on health care issues.

24. (—): **National Issues Forum** conducted in hundreds of communities. In-depth discussions of three or four key issues each year by grass roots groups around the nation.

APPENDIX B

LOCAL TOWN MEETING: SAN ANTONIO

Market Penetration

Although the penetration of Paragon cable service ranges above 55 percent when using either total population or total households for a base, penetration among Hispanics appears low (see table below).

Two issues contribute to the seemingly low penetration of the Hispanic market. First, the methodology used by KBLCOM to determine Hispanic ethnicity of Paragon subscribers was faulty. A question was asked about race, and the following answer categories were provided: White, Hispanic, Black, Asian, Other. Many Hispanics consider themselves "white" so when they are asked such a research question, they will answer "white." Incorrect information results from this type of question in San Antonio unless the "white" and "Hispanic" categories are collapsed. To ask such a question in San Antonio, it should be separated into a race and an ethnicity question or the answer categories should be Anglo, Hispanic, Black, Asian, Other. Second, San Antonio's Hispanic population is comprised of assimilated Hispanics (the bulk of the group) and Hispanics who continue to speak only Spanish and live traditional Hispanic lifestyles. Assimilated Hispanics may have had a greater tendency than unassimilated Hispanics to answer "white" to the race question.

If we collapse the white and Hispanic answer categories from the KBLCOM survey, we find 91.8 percent of the population in Bexar County is white or Hispanic and 8.2 is black, asian or other. These statistics compare favorably with the U.S. Census which shows 8.8 percent of the population to be black, asian or native american. When it comes to measuring ethnicity in San Antonio, the questions require specific answer categories to obtain correct information.

We can conclude from the KBLCOM survey that, at the very least, penetration of Paragon cable service is 30.2 among Hispanics in Bexar County. We do not know how high the actual penetration might be.

	Bexar County[1]	Paragon Subscribers[2]	Penetration (Percent)
Total population	1,185,394	670,800	56.6
Total households	409,043	258,000	63.1
Hispanic population	589,180	177,800	30.2

1. U.S. Bureau of Census, 1990 Census.
2. KBLCOM random survey of Paragon subscribers, November 1991.

APPENDIX C

LOCAL TOWN MEETING: SAN FRANCISCO

"AMERICANS ON AMERIKA"
A Report on the Results of a Pilot Electronic Town Meeting
March, 1987

Overview

This paper summarizes the results of a pilot Electronic Town Meeting or "ETM" (a program that combines elements of a talk show, documentary, and scientific opinion poll). "AMERICANS ON AMERIKA" aired on February 23, 1987 and was produced by KGO-TV (the ABC affiliate in San Francisco) to respond to the controversial mini-series, "Amerika." The ETM used a telephone-based opinion poll co-developed by Choosing Our Future (a non-partisan organization that promotes citizen dialogue through two-way TV programming) and the League of Women Voters of the Bay Area.

What is an Electronic Town Meeting?

As the modern equivalent of the New England Town Meeting, Electronic Town Meetings can bring new life to our democracy. An ETM provides a powerful way for a community to get together, talk things over, and respond to critical problems and opportunities. By obtaining live feedback from a randomly pre-selected sample of citizens, ETMs provide a reliable indication of community views. The random sample of citizens is selected in advance and votes from their homes by dialing special telephone numbers. Within two to three minutes, their "votes" are shown with computer graphics in the TV studio. ETMs enable a democratic sample of citizens to contribute their views to the climate of public opinion that guides our leaders.

The Random Sample

Unlike general call-ins (where anyone watching can "vote"), ETM feedback uses a pre-selected sample to insure that voting fairly reflects the views of the overall community. A pool of 5,000 random telephone numbers was developed by the Survey Research Center at U.C. Berkeley. Trained volunteers then phoned these random numbers three weeks before the ETM. Ultimately, 512 adult residents agreed to participate and were sent an information packet describing the voting procedure. A week before the ETM, the sample was called back and 422 persons confirmed their willingness to participate. An average of roughly 250 persons voted on questions in the ETM (which produces an error range of plus or minus 6 percentage points).

YOUR INSTRUCTION SHEET
FOR
"AMERICANS ON AMERIKA"

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 23rd, 7:00 pm
Channel 7, KGO-TV, ABC

You are part of a very important group that represents the entire Bay Area. As one of only 500 people who have been chosen at random to participate in the Electronic Town Meeting, your vote is very important. Be sure to get comfortable in front of your TV set before 7:00 pm on Monday, February 23rd with your telephone handy.

How It Works:

During the hour-long show the host of the program—Ronn Owens—will lead a discussion with an in-studio audience on the major issues of the mini-series "Amerika." Approximately six times during the program, you and other members of the random sample (watching from home) will be asked to vote "yes" or "no" on a question that you will see on your television screen. As soon as you have selected your answer. immediately dial the number below that goes with your choice:

TO VOTE:	DIAL:
Yes	**(900) 200-3440**
No	**(900) 200-3444**

Special Instructions:

- As soon as you decide, vote quickly by dialing the number that goes with your choice.
- If you should happen to get a busy signal, hang up and immediately **re-dial.**
- You will begin to hear a recorded message when your call goes through—this means that your vote has been automatically counted. Please don't listen to the whole recording—hang up so other calls can get through.
- Vote only **once** per household for each question.
- Return to your TV so you can see the results—they will be displayed within 2 minutes after the question is asked. Wait for the next question.

There will be **no charge** for your telephone calls. Your vote is very important. Be sure to participate. If you have any questions, call Choosing Our Future at: **(415) 853-0600** during normal business hours, Monday through Friday.

Thank you for being part of this historic experiment!

MEMORANDUM OF AGREEMENT
BAY VOICE & KRON-TV

1. Mutual Goals

KRON-TV, the San Francisco NBC-TV affiliate, and BAY VOICE, a California non-profit corporation, share the mutual goals of "revitalizing democracy and serving citizens of the Bay Area by enabling them to dialogue on the critical issues of the day and build working agreements that are communicated to key decision makers."

2. Nature of the ETM Agreement

KRON-TV and BAY VOICE seek to achieve their mutual goals by working together to produce one or more television programs in the format of an "Electronic Town Meeting" (or "ETM") of the following nature:

- A program of at least an hour's duration that is broadcast in the third or forth quarters of 1989 during prime-time hours from 7:30 to 10:00 PM preferred and 7:30 to 11:00 PM possible, Sunday through Thursday evenings. It is important to air the program during prime-time to ensure that the scientifically selected sample can watch and participate in the ETM.

- The ETM will involve informational presentations, in-studio discussions, and input from the scientific sample of citizens from the nine Bay Area counties. The format is intended to generate informed dialogue and a working consensus that can be communicated to key decision makers.

KRON and BAY VOICE agree to work together on the initial pilot dealing with the issue of growth in the San Francisco Bay Area region. The objective will be to discover working agreements within the community for responding to the challenges of growth. Both parties hope this program will serve our mutual goals and lead to further opportunities for working together on ETMs. Presented below is a description of the needs and responsibilities of each party.

3. Requirements of KRON and BAY VOICE

In order to fulfill its public responsibilities, KRON-TV requires that the ETM be thoroughly researched, be fair and balanced in the presentation of viewpoints, be produced by KRON-TV, and use KRON talent and staff effectively.

To allocate its scarce time and resources to the ETM project, BAY VOICE requires that the program include all ETM elements (i.e., an informational presentation, in-studio discussion, feedback from the random sample, and the delivery of the results to key decision makers), and that its staff has regular and substantial opportunities for making creative inputs into the design and implementation of the ETM.

4. Allocation of Responsibilities—BAY VOICE

- Identifying the ETM topic and carefully researching the issue to develop the key policy questions and trade-offs to be explored in the ETM.

- Identifying experts and advocates to participate in the program.

- Suggesting the wording of questions for the ETM.

- Providing suggestions on program format and design of the ETM so as to build a working agreement.

- Developing the random sample of citizen-viewers and arranging for their participation through live, phone-in polling.

- Identifying key leaders and decision makers to receive the feedback at the end of the ETM.

5. Allocation of Responsibilities—KRON-TV

- KRON will be responsible for supervision of all aspects of production. including planning, researching, and actual production of the ETM, including supervision of BAY VOICE paid producers. KRON agrees to make a good faith effort to work in close consultation with BAY VOICE and to be responsive to production inputs and assistance from BAY VOICE.

- Final selection of informational materials (e.g., for the mini-documentaries) topic development, experts, advocates, key leaders, decision makers, and all in-studio participants.

- Selection of date and time for airing the program, and providing effective on-air promotion.

6. Finances

KRON-TV and BAY VOICE will work together to develop a production budget for the ETM. Generally, KRON agrees to cover all "non-out-of-pocket" production expenses, including facilities, regular time for production staff, air-time, and on-air promotion.

BAY VOICE agrees to cover the costs of its own staff and consultants for the work described in paragraph 4 above. BAY VOICE also agrees to pay for additional "out-of-pocket" expenses, including, but not limited to, overtime, premiums and penalties, and meals for studio crews, directors, artists, editors and any remote crews. To keep overtime. costs to a minimum, KRON agrees to try and schedule the production during non-overtime work periods. BAY VOICE also agrees to pay for phone lines, any set expense, the payment of the ETM producer and required associate or assistant producers and their expenses.

These "out-of-pocket" expenses will all be detailed in the production budget, agreed upon by BAY VOICE, and KRON will be responsible for administering that budget. KRON will be responsible for any overages from that budget, except those previously approved in writing by BAY VOICE.

BAY VOICE's goal is to find a way through underwriting to finance the development of ongoing ETMs with KRON. KRON and BAY VOICE agree to work cooperatively to develop a "model process" for commercial underwriting that makes the ETM financially viable for both organizations. KRON agrees to allocate two billboards (opening and closing) and two minutes of commercial time within the ETM program to compensate underwriter(s) identified by BAY VOICE. BAY VOICE agrees to coordinate with KRON in approaching all underwriters.

7. Credits

KRON and BAY VOICE agree that all organizations will be recognized for their unique contributions to this project:

- KRON will be recognized for co-producing and airing the Electronic Town Meeting and using the station's resources and staff.

- BAY VOICE and KRON will be recognized for identifying the ETM issue and convening the ETM.

- BAY VOICE will be recognized for co-producing the ETM, initiating the electronic polling process, identifying key stakeholders, conducting background research, providing scientific feedback from a random sample, and identifying the decision-makers to whom the community feedback is delivered.

APPENDIX D

The New York Times/Op-Ed Page Tuesday, November 17, 1992

Keep Politics Alive

By Lawrence K. Grossman

While we celebrate the improved voter turnout in this election, we should also recognize that the public's intense disaffection with politics and politicians will not disappear overnight. We no longer can afford to rely on a periodic binge of frenzied Presidential campaigning to wake people up once every four years.

We now have the ability in our media-rich environment not only to inform citizens about major issues but also to involve them directly in the processes of government. And paradoxically, we can do that more effectively between elections, when people can focus on one issue at a time, rather than during the confusing din of Presidential campaigns, when voters are besieged by a multitude of issues and candidates.

One of the first steps the political parties should take is to extend the life of the bipartisan Commission on Presidential Debates. The commission should stay around between elections to produce three or four high-level nationally televised debates and forums every year. Each of these "electronic town meetings" should focus on a single national issue.

The first event should be devoted to health care. It could be televised from the Capitol or the Library of Congress and should be scheduled for next spring. Health care is the one issue that the three major Presidential candidates agreed should be dealt with first in a new administration. Bill Clinton, accompanied by his Secretary of Health and Human Services and, perhaps, his budget director, should use the meeting to argue for his health-care program.

Republican leaders would respond with their own alternatives and ideas. And, as in the Presidential debates, journalists and the audience would be able to ask questions of both sides. The bipartisan commission would develop the formats for the programs.

Spinning off from that, Congress might schedule its own health care debates, which would be available for live coverage on C-SPAN, CNN and public television. State and local legislatures and government officials should organize similar forums on local radio and TV stations as well as cable. The League of Women Voters, health-care groups and civic organizations should distribute background materials to the public.

The political parties, together with these groups, would generate local town meetings and rallies at the grass-roots level. Schools and universities would be supplied with discussion materials. In short, every possible medium and method would be used to further debate.

In the years ahead, other vital issues should receive the same treatment. The centerpiece each time would be a nationally televised "town meeting," produced by the Bipartisan Commission on Presidential Debates and featuring the top officials from both political parties. One significant side benefit of this effort would be to strengthen the parties by giving them a visible new role to play between elections.

Hold more TV debates.

If it works, we could focus people's attention on the major issues, help restore the public's faith in the democratic process and perhaps transform the widespread disaffection with politics into widespread participation.

Lawrence K. Grossman is former president of PBS and NBC News.

© 1992, The New York Times Company. Distributed by The New York Times/Special Features.

APPENDIX E

The Markle Foundation

A DISCUSSION OF ELECTRONIC CITIZENSHIP

Planning Meeting
Washington, DC
July 21, 1992

List of Participants

Dr. Jeffrey Abramson
Professor of Politics
Department of Politics
Brandeis University

Mr. Paul Aicher
Topsfield Foundation, Inc.

Mr. Gary Arlen
Arlen Communications, Inc.

Prof. Benjamin R. Barber
Political Science Department
Rutgers University

Ms. Edith Bjornson
Program Officer
Markle Foundation

Ms. Cathy Clark
Program Coordinator
Communications and Society Program
The Aspen Institute

Mr. Owen Comora
Comora & Associates, Inc.

Mr. Charles M. Firestone
Director
Communications and Society Program
The Aspen Institute

Mr. Frank Leicht
Consultant
Leicht Productions, Inc.

Mr. Lloyd Morrisett
President
The Markle Foundation

Mr. Mike Michaelson
Executive Vice President
C-SPAN

Ms. Siobhan Nicolau
President
Hispanic Policy Development Project

Mr. Norman Ornstein
Resident Scholar
American Enterprise Institute

Mr. Erik Sandberg-Diment
Author

Mr. William Schneider
CNN Political Unit

Ms. Deborah Wadsworth
Director
Public Agenda Foundation

APPENDIX F

TOWARD A DEMOCRATIC DESIGN FOR ELECTRONIC TOWN MEETINGS

The Aspen Institute
Communications and Society Program
The Aspen Institute Wye Center
Queenstown, Maryland
October 26–28, 1992

List of Participants

Dr. Jeffrey Abramson
Professor of Politics
Department of Politics
Brandeis University
Waltham, Massachusetts

Mr. Mark Benerofe
Director for Media
Prodigy Services Company
White Plains, New York

Mr. Kirk Bergstrom
President
Worldlink
San Fancisco, California

Ms. Edith Bjornson
Program Officer
The Markle Foundation
New York, New York

Dr. Red Burns
New York University
New York, New York

Ms. Catherine Clark
Program Assistant
The Markle Foundation
New York, New York

Mr. Owen Comora
Comora & Associates, Inc.
New York, New York

Professor Tom Cronin
Department of Political Science
Colorado College
Colorado Springs, Colorado

Mr. Duane Elgin
Director
Choosing Our Future
Mill Valley, California

Mr. Charles Firestone
Director
Communications and Society Program
The Aspen Institute
Washington, D.C.

Mr. Julian Fowles
Chilmark Productions
Los Angeles, California

Mr. Lawrence K. Grossman
New York, New York

Mr. Richard D. Heffner
Chairman
MPAA Classification and Rating Administration
New York, New York

Mr. John Hiles
Vice President and General Manager
Business Simulation Division
MAXIS, Inc.
Monterey, California

Ms. Pam Hill
Executive Producer
Special Assignment Unit
Cable News Network
New York, New York

Ms. Jean Johnson
Vice President
Public Agenda Foundation
New York, New York

Ms. Katharina Kopp
Program Coordinator
Communications and Society Program
The Aspen Institute
Washington, D.C.

Mr. Frank Leicht
Consultant
Leicht Productions, Inc.
Mamaroneck, New York

Mr. Lloyd Morrisett
President
The Markle Foundation
New York, New York

Ms. Siobhan Nicolau
President
Hispanic Policy Development Project
New York, New York

Mr. Bruce Sidran
Vice President and Executive Director
MCC
Washington, D.C.

Dr. Armando Valdez
President
Valdez and Associates
Los Altos, California

Ms. Deborah Wadsworth
Executive Director
Public Agenda Foundation
New York, New York

Dr. Christopher Weaver
Media Technology Limited
Rockville, Maryland

Mr. Tracy Westen
President
Center for Governmental Studies
Los Angeles, California

APPENDIX G: Communications and Society Program Statement

The Aspen Institute's Communications and Society Program seeks to advance communications and information policy-making to the greatest benefit of society. The specific purposes of the Program are (1) to provide a neutral forum for divergent stakeholders to assess the impact of the communications and information revolutions on democratic institutions and values, (2) to help bring about integrated, thoughtful, value-based decision-making in the communications and information policy fields to cope with problems and challenges of the late 20th century and beyond, and (3) to offer, when appropriate, recommendations of policies and actions at local, state, national, and international levels. The specific issues that the Program seeks to explore in 1993 fall into the four categories listed below: communications policy-making, communications for social benefit, communications and education, and communications for global understanding. The subject areas are not mutually exclusive. Recent and future project titles are listed below:

1. COMMUNICATIONS POLICY

- Democracy in the Information Age (annual subscription seminar)
- Annual Conference on Telecommunications Policy
  - 1992 – Competition at the Local Loop: Policies and Implications
  - 1991 – Towards Consensus on American Telecommunications Policy
- Computer Research Policy Summit (1992)
- Aspen Communications Counsel's Forum
  - 1993 – Towards a Reformulation of the Communications Act
  - 1992 – A Preliminary Review of the Communications Act

2. SOCIETAL IMPACT OF THE INFORMATION INFRASTRUCTURE

- The Aspen Forum on Communications and Society (proposed)
- New Paradigms for a New Democracy (1993)
- Toward a Democratic Design for Electronic Town Meetings (1992)
- The Information Evolution:
  How New Information Technologies are Spurring Complex Patterns of Change (1992)
- Assessing the Public Broadcasting Needs of Minority and Diverse Audiences (1992)
- Television for the 21st Century: The Next Wave (1992)
- SeniorNet Services: Towards a New Environment for Seniors (1991)
- Online for Social Benefit (1989)

3. COMMUNICATIONS AND EDUCATION

- Media Literacy: A Report of the National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy (1992)
- Defining Education's Role in Telecommunications Policy (1991)
- Telecommunications as a Tool for Educational Reform:
  Implementing the NCTM Mathematics Standards (1991)

4. COMMUNICATIONS FOR GLOBAL UNDERSTANDING

- The Writer as a Conscience of the World — 1993 Jerusalem International Book Fair Aspen Forum
- Television News Coverage of Minorities:
  Models and Options for the Commission on Television Policy (1992)
- Television and Elections (1992)

The Aspen Cube: A Three-Dimensional Roadmap for Communications Policy Issues

The field covered by The Aspen Institute's Communications and Society Program is vast, but the many issues it covers can be defined and interconnected by means of a three-dimensional matrix, a kind of Rubik's Cube of the Information Age. Along one axis are characteristic trends of the Information Age, which will vary:

Digitization, Convergence, and Compression
Commodification of Information, Competition and Concentration
Virtuality; Networking and Simulation
Disintermediation and Fragmentation
Interactivity and User Control

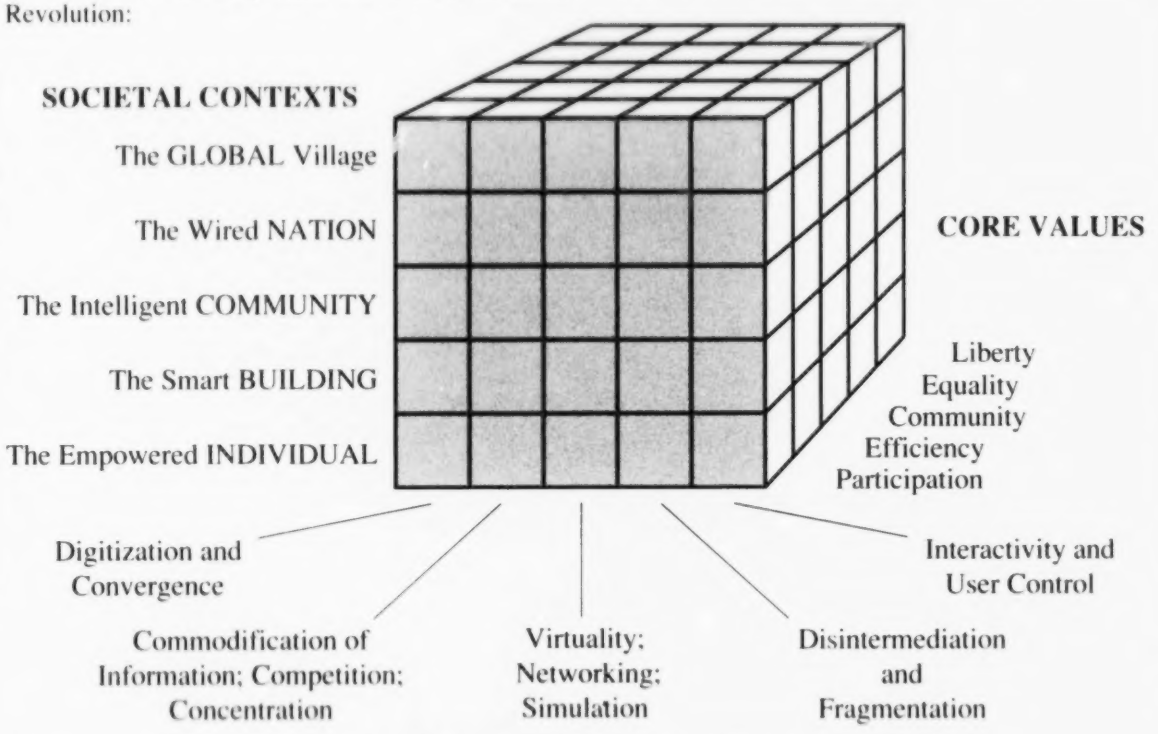
Across another side of the matrix are the societal contexts in which one should view the issues, viz., international; national; community; home, school, or office; and the individual. We use labels that have entered the vocabulary from the Communications Revolution:

The Global Village *The Wired Nation* *The Intelligent Community* *The Smart Building* *The Empowered Individual*

The third side of the cube lists the values that are most associated by the new communications media, structures, and institutions. This list, too, can vary. Our present approach looks at:

Liberty (including Privacy and Free Speech)
Equality (including Universality and Equity)
Community (including Diversity and Quality of Life)
Efficiency (including Productivity)
Participation (including Access)

This construct can be pictured as a cubic matrix. From any particular point or cube within the matrix, one can move along any or all of the three axes, connecting technological trends, strata of society, and values.



The Aspen Institute
Publications Office
P.O. Box 150
Queenstown, MD 21658